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Discourse on the Frontiers of History: Material Culture and Social Reproduction in Early Scotland

ABSTRACT

The historical archaeology of early Medieval Scotland is of
interest outside of Britain because, unlike much of Europe,
Scotland experienced little direct intervention from the Ro-
man Empire. Early Scotland has left few contemporary doc-
uments and is therefore only barely historical; consequently
archaeology has always played a significant role in the
study of its origins. That role has generally been to provide
illustrations for historical discussions, especially in the case
of the Picts who occupied what was to become the core of
the Scottish state. This study suggests how the archaeolog-
ical evidence can be used to go beyond mere illustration and
beyond the limitations of the aristocratic interests which are
embodied in the contemporary sources and to begin writing
a representative social history. The concept of *fields of dis-
course* is used to provide a materialist method for integrat-
ing texts and artifacts. Attention here is focused on the
architecture of the hillforts, the significance of the Symbol
Stones, and on the settlement patterns as revealed by aerial
photography.

Introduction

Scotland in the early Middle Ages was on the
margins of the literate world: in fact the term Early
Historic period when used to refer to the span A.D.
500–900 might be seen as somewhat optimistic
given the scarcity of contemporary textual evi-
dence (Alcock 1981). Yet the few surviving texts
do allow one to understand the society of that time
far more fully than is possible for the Roman Iron
Age which preceded it. Moreover the available
documents suggest that these centuries were a crit-
ical time which saw the disparate kingdoms of
northern Britain develop into the embryonic Scot-
tish nation. Elsewhere in Europe this period fol-
lowing the eclipse of the Roman Empire is dispar-

agingly regarded as the Dark Ages, but here,
because it provides the earliest evidence of the
Scottish nation, it has attracted the interest of Scot-
tish historians and nationalist politicians. As an
instance of state formation the case of Scotland is
interesting, not the least because its near isolation
from the Imperial center of Rome allowed it to
develop with a degree of self-determination.
Within the general theme of the formation of Scot-
tish state, this paper pays particular attention to
how archaeology contributes to the understanding
of the social practices which maintained and repro-
duced the political institutions of early Scotland.

It hardly needs stating that the study of material
culture plays a central role in social analysis. It is
less often stated (particularly by historical archae-
ologists) that such studies cannot be conducted
without drawing upon the textual elements of that
material culture. This is true even when, as was
probably the case in early Scotland (Hughes 1980),
documents are scarce. It is this centrality of mate-
rial culture in the analysis of historic societies that
links this study with others in this volume, because
it brings into sharp relief two issues which are of
central importance to the practice of historical ar-
chaeology. Firstly, it raises, in a very blunt form,
the major question about the relationship between
history and archaeology: how can archaeologists
integrate the study of texts and artifacts without
trivializing either branch of scholarship? The sec-
ond issue, which arises from this first one, but
which is not unique to historical archaeology, fo-
cuses on the problem of reading those artifacts
which do not carry writing. Here the question is
simply: how should researchers attempt to interpret
the non-documentary evidence, which is after all
the task of archaeologists?

So far Scotland has been used in a general way
to refer to the northern third of Britain, but serious
historical discussion demands more geographical
precision. During the Early Historic period, Scot-
land as a single nation did not exist. The area of
northern Britain which came to form Scotland was
in fact inhabited by four different cultural groups,
each with its own language and each composed of
numerous semi-autonomous kingdoms (Duncan
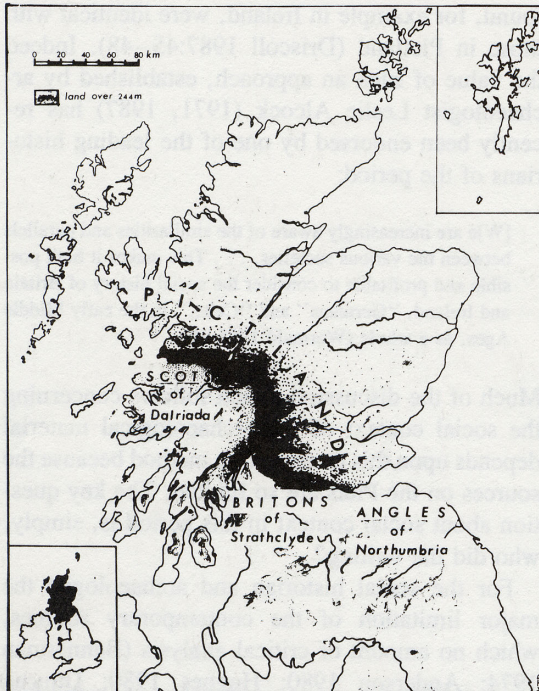1975:41–79; Smyth 1984). A map representing the

FIGURE 1. Political map of Early Historic Scotland, ca. A.D. 700.

political configuration around A.D. 700 (Figure 1) gives some idea of the complexity of the situation. The Venerable Bede, who is the major source on this matter (Colgrave and Mynors 1969), suggests that the situation was as follows: the Scots, who subsequently gave their name to the whole country, occupied only the western coastal region and the inner Hebridean Islands, an area known as Dalriada. They shared much of the cultural heritage of Ireland as demonstrated by their shared language and social institutions. They were also close in political terms: the ruling dynasties often had interests on both sides of the Irish Sea (Bannerman 1974:1–26, 72–106; Smyth 1984:84–141). In southwest Scotland there existed a British kingdom centered in Strathclyde (west of Glasgow) and extending southward into the southern hills of the Borders region. Culturally the Strathclyde Britains were akin to the Welsh. In the southeast the native

Britons were dominated by relative newcomers, Angles who began migrating from the continent sometime around A.D. 400. By A.D. 700 English was being spoken as far north as the river Forth, around modern Edinburgh. The remainder, by and far the largest portion, was the home of a different native Celtic people, the Picts.

Of all these peoples, the Picts are the most obscure historically. Their direct contact with the Roman world was limited; it was confined to short episodes of conquest and military occupation (Breeze 1982). As a result, both Christianity and literacy were late arrivals. Little is known of their language other than that it was different from Welsh and Irish and it survives only in a handful of personal names. They left no texts of their own aside from a few largely indecipherable inscriptions (Jackson 1955). Nevertheless the Picts are the key to any understanding of the development of ''Scotland,'' not the least because Pictland occupied a vast area which includes much of the best land in northern Britain, stretching from the north shore of the Forth up the east coast and beyond, including the Orkney Islands, and extending throughout the central Highlands to the northwest, including the outer Hebridean Islands. The harsh and inaccessible Highland massif, which had been such an obstacle to the Roman conquest, served to separate the eastern and northern coastal regions of Pictland from its neighbors to the west and south. The coastal belt and the broad valleys which penetrate the east central Highlands are among the most fertile places in northern Britain. It was here in the Pictish heartland that the social institutions which gave rise to the medieval Scottish state were born. The social practices which gave structure to these institutions are the subject of this paper.

Texts and Artifacts in Theory

At the risk of overgeneralizing and offending, it can be said that early medieval texts are most often studied in isolation from material remains by historians, frequently with the tacit approval of archaeologists. It has been rare even among anthropologically-trained archaeologists for texts to be

analyzed as part of the whole assemblage of ma-
terial culture. This division of labor has had im-
portant implications for the way archaeologists an-
alyze texts and artifacts, and for the way
researchers conceive of the relationship between
history and archaeology. For a fuller discussion,
see Driscoll (1988a). Henry Glassie (1975:8–12)
was not, of course, the first to point out that doc-
uments can provide only a selective view of the
past, but, perhaps more articulately than any ar-
chaeologist, he has suggested how artifacts can be
used to recover the expressions and attitudes of
people who did not participate in making texts and
whose perspectives were thus excluded from the
conventional "historical" record. In the Middle
Ages, the elite bias in the documentary record was
far more pronounced than in Middle Virginia, con-
sequently the medieval archaeologist has responsi-
bility for matters of social history which are that
much more sweeping.

This responsibility is especially true for Pict-
land. The meager contemporary documentation on
the Picts consists of lists of Kings, terse entries in
Annals and Chronicles, and a few ecclesiastical
histories (A. Anderson 1922; M. Anderson 1980).
These texts were made by clerics who were careful
to note the deaths of great men—kings and bish-
ops. They recorded current events such as the oc-
currence of battles, but not always the outcome,
which then was a matter of common knowledge,
even if it is not now. They charted the progress of
Christianity, principally through the mythological
vehicle of Saints' lives (Hughes 1972; Davies
1982; Smyth 1984). In short, the sources are tre-
mendously limited in subject matter. In order to
gain any notion of the contemporary social prac-
tices one must look beyond those texts specifically
concerned with the Picts to those sources which
inform archaeologists about other peoples in early
medieval Britain and Ireland. Here the principal
sources are the early Irish and Anglo-Saxon law
codes and the heroic literature, which is best ex-
emplified by the epic of *Beowulf*. In seeking to
apply this knowledge to Pictland one must be care-
ful to extract the underlying principles of social
organization common throughout Britain and Ire-
land and avoid suggestions that specific practices

found, for example in Ireland, were identical with
those in Pictland (Driscoll 1987:45–48). Indeed
the value of such an approach, established by ar-
chaeologist Leslie Alcock (1971, 1987) has re-
cently been endorsed by one of the leading histo-
rians of the period:

> [W]e are increasingly aware of the similarities and parallels
> between the various societies. . . . This makes it both pos-
> sible and profitable to consider the social history of Britain
> and Ireland, "Germans" and "Celts," in the early Middle
> Ages, as a whole (Wormald 1985:81).

Much of the discussion which follows concerning
the social context of the archaeological material
depends upon this comparative method because the
sources on the Picts are so limited. The key ques-
tion about social context in this period is, simply,
who did the writing?

For the social historian and archaeologist the
major limitation of the contemporary sources,
which no amount of critical analysis (Bannerman
1974; Anderson 1980; Hughes 1980; Duncan
1981; Cowan 1984) or comparative effort can
overcome, concerns their circumstances of pro-
duction. To consider this problem researchers need
not go into the specific arguments about the origins
of individual texts, because they were all produced
in such similar circumstances. The Church held a
monopoly on literate knowledge in early medieval
Britain and Ireland. This control is evident from
internal evidence in even the most secular of texts
such as *Beowulf* (Wormald 1978). Not only was
the Church deeply dependent on the patronage of
the nobility for its existence, senior clerics were
frequently themselves aristocrats (Hughes 1966;
Mayr-Harting 1972; Smyth 1984:84–141). Natu-
rally therefore these texts, which were produced by
the aristocracy for aristocratic audiences, reflect
aristocratic interests and played an important ideo-
logical role in maintaining the social position of
the elite (Nieke 1988; Driscoll 1988b).

This extremely narrow focus of the documents
makes the issue of the relationship between the
texts and artifacts quite acute. Superficially there
appear to be few areas of mutual interest; and me-
dievalists, not just Pictish scholars, have generally
been content to regard history and archaeology as

independent investigative procedures fully able to stand alone. This isolation exists despite the fact that the texts and artifacts were produced within the same society (Driscoll 1988a). It is this fractured situation within historical scholarship that forces scholars to look for analytical methods which do not reduce the relationship to one of contrasts and oppositions. The theoretical approach described below has been developed by John Barrett (1987a) in an attempt to reconstitute a prehistoric social archaeology. In this writer's view, it provides a method for integrating documentary and archaeological material into a satisfying social history.

Fields of Discourse

In outlook and inspiration Barrett's position shares similarities with the approaches associated with recent studies from Cambridge involving Ian Hodder (1982, 1986), but it differs in several important respects. Both positions are contextual, insofar as both Barrett and Hodder would agree that the meaning of an artifact is understood from the context of its production and use, but at issue is what each means by context. The main difference lies in Barrett's attempt to propose analytical criteria for examining how different classes of material culture are drawn upon in the reproduction of social relations. Hodder, on the other hand, has not yet risen above the interesting case study or managed to show the interrelationship between different sorts of material culture within a particular society. Barrett (1987b) provides a more sustained critique of the Hodder position.

The key feature which distinguishes these two post-processualist positions is that Hodder has failed to grasp the point that power is the central element in all social relations, while for Barrett it is the starting point. In pursuing this point Barrett has adhered more closely to the theory of Structuration as outlined by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979, 1981) and has seen in archaeology evidence for particular social practices.

Barrett has developed the concept of *fields of discourse* in order to analyze the aspects of power

which characterize social interaction. In his view, archaeological remains are seen as the residue of the material technologies of power, which have been employed to negotiate social relations, and thus to reproduce positions of dominance and resistance. An important quality of this cultural residue is that it exists in time and space and is therefore archaeologically accessible. There are a few points which require definition before developing these ideas with reference to the archaeological evidence. Firstly, *discourse* is used here to describe all sorts of human interaction—not just verbal exchange; but like a conversation it implies a speaker and listener. In a conversation both parties bring particular cultural attitudes and resources to bear in shaping the direction and content of the exchange. These include control of forms of knowledge (like literacy) and access to material things and locations:

> The cultural resources which are drawn upon to define and instigate the authoritative demands of discourse, and those resources which, in turn, are chosen to be employed in acknowledging the existence of authority. These resources may include architectural settings . . . the adornments of dress, or the items exchanged (Barrett 1987a:11).

In Early Historic Scotland another major source of authority relied upon both the control of literacy and knowledge about Christianity.

Any particular social practice engages a range of specific cultural resources that are drawn upon to structure and control the discourse. It is here that archaeology comes in, because those cultural resources include objects which become archaeological evidence:

> The material world acts as a storage of cultural resources, including architectural forms of spaces and boundaries and temporal cycles of day/night and seasonality in which people pass through, and are held in place by, this architecture. The material world therefore acts as a complex series of *locals* within which meaningful and authoritative forms of discourse can be sustained (Barrett 1987a:8).

It is here also that the reciprocal notion of power is important. Since access to those resources is unlikely to be equal, there is a power in response and resistance as well as in initiation and dominance. In a conversation the speaker's power lies in the ability to initiate and define the subject mat-

FIGURE 2. The fort of Dundurn occupies a volcanic plug which rises abruptly from the floodplain of western Strathearn, Perthshire. (Photo by author.)

ter; the listener's power is more reactive, but still significant: it is within the listener's power either to participate and thereby shape the discourse or to ignore it and walk away. Simply put, power is two-sided within discourse.

Pictish Discourses: Hillforts, Symbol Stones, and Farmsteads

As indicated above the Picts played a pivotal role in forming the Scottish state. That role was to establish a stable administrative system based upon the control of agricultural land by a stable nobility. This role may be illustrated by reference to three aspects of Pictish archaeology: the fortified residences of the aristocracy, the erection of carved

stone monuments, and the agricultural system and the settlement pattern it engendered.

Archaeologically the best known settlement sites in Pictland, as in the rest of Celtic Britain, are the defended hilltop strongholds of the nobility (Alcock 1988). This fame is due partly to the high visibility of the often substantial ruins of dry-stone and earthen ramparts (Figure 2), and in part to interest sparked by the few contemporary references to these hillforts. The two references in the *Annals of Ulster* (Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887–1901) to Dundurn in Strathearn, Perthshire, are typical. The first says that Dundurn was besieged in A.D. 683, but it does not say by whom, or indicate the outcome of the siege. The second notes the death of a king there in A.D. 889 in obscure circumstances. Excavations have recently
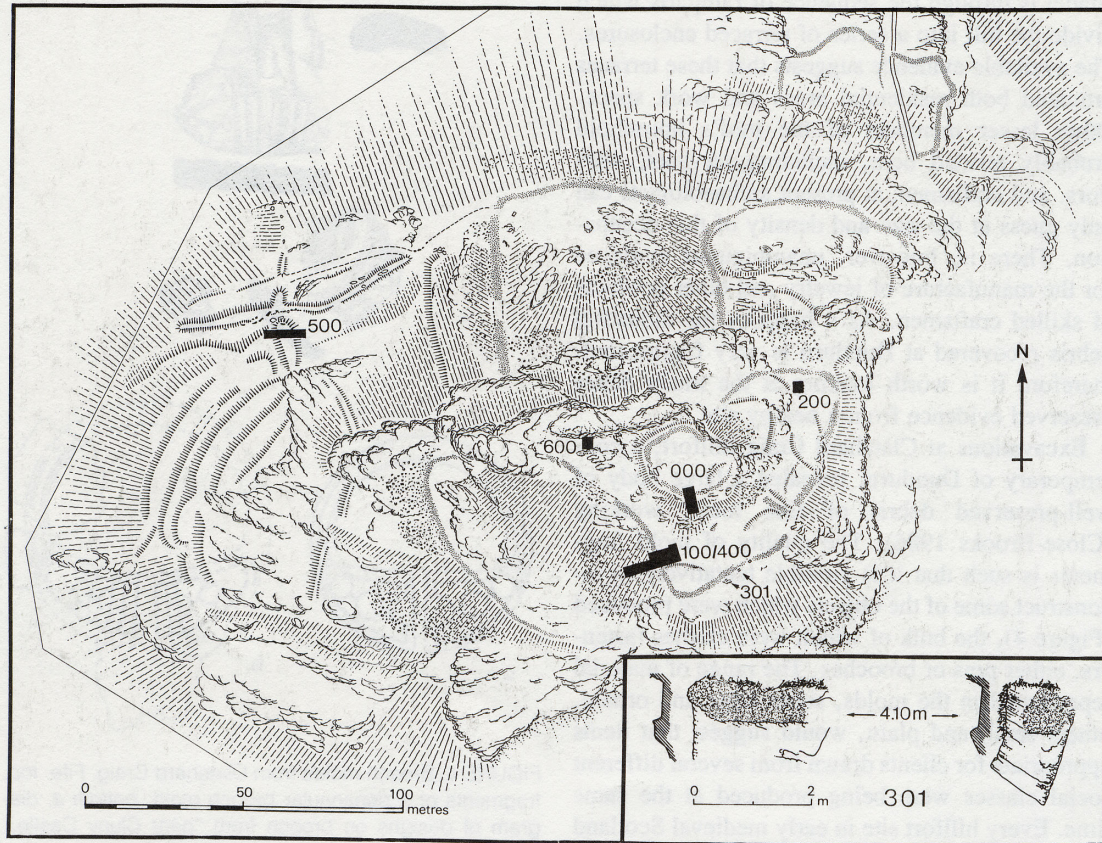
FIGURE 3. Plan of Dundurn based on survey by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, showing the 1976–1977 excavations (Alcock et al. 1989). (Courtesy of Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland.)

demonstrated the existence of structures here dating back to the 6th century A.D. and have shown that this early occupation phase was destroyed by fire, perhaps as a result of the siege (Alcock et al. 1989). The main importance of excavations of sites like this should not be, however, that they allow archaeologists to verify and amplify the texts, rather it is that hillforts served as settings for certain social interactions and, indeed, were the means by which particular social relations were negotiated. There are two basic ways of examining the role of hillforts in social discourse: one is to study their architectural attributes and the other is

to look at the types of activities these sites supported.

One obvious aspect of these sites has already been mentioned. They were fortified to withstand attack by political rivals and to provide places of refuge; however, the walls did more than protect the inhabitants and intimidate enemies. The plan (Figure 3) illustrates the major attributes of Dundurn's spatial arrangement. The principal residential enclosure occupies the summit. This citadel is small enough to have been roofed and could have accommodated only a select few, perhaps limited to the lord's immediate household. Access to the

citadel is through the sequence of ramparts which divide the hill into a series of terraced enclosures. The available evidence suggests that these terraces provided both residential areas and work space. Other lesser members of the lord's household probably resided here, including servants, warriors, and craftsmen; at present archaeologists can only guess at the size and density of this occupation. There is, however, unambiguous evidence for the manufacture of jewelry and other products of skilled craftsmen. As it happens the industrial debris recovered at Dundurn is very fragmented, therefore it is worth looking at the much better preserved evidence from a nearby site.

Excavations at Clatchard Craig hillfort, a contemporary of Dundurn, revealed a large body of well-preserved debris of fine metal working (Close-Brooks 1986). The quality of mold fragments is such that it is possible tentatively to reconstruct some of the objects which were produced (Figure 4), the bulk of which were clothes fasteners, either pins or brooches. The range of material represented in the molds, some large and ornate, others small and plain, would suggest that items appropriate for clients drawn from several different social classes were being produced at the same time. Every hillfort site in early medieval Scotland excavated in modern times has produced similar evidence, which suggests that the patronage and control of the production of fine metalwork was monopolized by the elite.

Settlements like Clatchard and Dundurn are exceptional. The depth and complexity of their defenses implies a very high, if not royal, status. However the countryside around them contains a large number of smaller, parallel sites, which were also enclosed by ramparts and occupied locally prominent hills. One unexcavated example which is likely to be Pictish in date is the cropmark site of Dunning located halfway between Dundurn and Clatchard Craig (Driscoll 1987:286–288). In the aerial photograph (Figure 5) the dark bands mark the lines of ditches which enclosed a slight hill. The material from the ditches would have been used to build ramparts, but subsequent agricultural activity has eroded the ramparts and filled in the ditches.
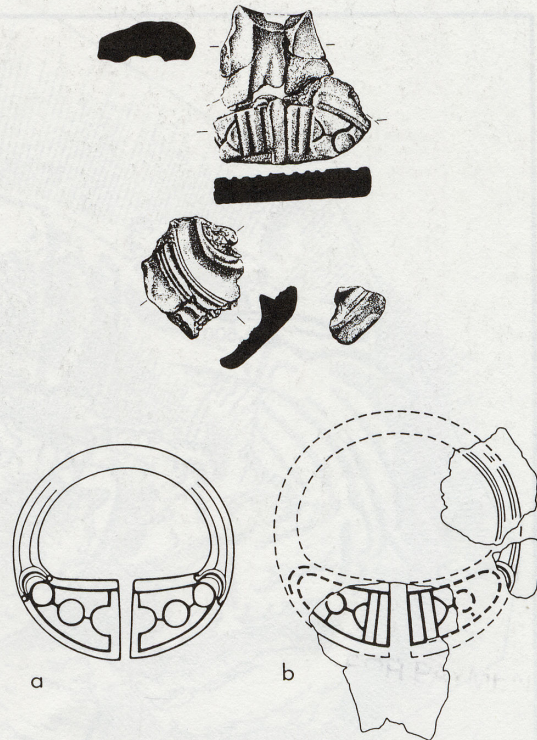

FIGURE 4. Brooch molds from Clatchard Craig, Fife: *top,* fragments of a penannular brooch mold; *bottom a,* diagram of designs on brooch from "near Cluny Castle," approximately 4.5 in. (11 cm) in diameter; *bottom b,* diagram of the design of the brooch reconstructed from the fragments (after Close-Brooks 1986).

The enclosing ramparts distinguish the hillforts from the scattered unenclosed settlements, which the majority of the population occupied. The cropmarks at Easter Kinnear (Figure 6) represent the remains of a farmstead or hamlet. The dark spots are the filled hollows once occupied by houses. The defenses of a place like Dundurn not only formed a physical barrier between social classes, but also reflected a particular noble attribute—the capacity to command and lead warriors. These wall-girt hills expressed this martial sentiment both to local inhabitants, whose landscape they visually dominated, and to any visitor progressing through the various ramparts to reach the center. Even in

FIGURE 5. Aerial photograph of cropmarks showing silted-up ditches of the fortified site of Dunknock, Dunning, Perthshire. (Courtesy of Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland.)

their present ruined state, these massive ramparts convey a notion of martial strength and social dominance.

Beyond the image and ideology of the ramparts there is another, perhaps more significant, way in which the ramparts worked for the Picts. The ramparts provided a field of discourse which served actively to reproduce the social positions of noble and commoner. Various legal texts from early medieval Britain and Ireland indicate that the commoners ruled by a particular noble were obliged to perform certain duties for their lord (Brooks 1971; Gerriets 1983; Warner 1988). Among these duties were the construction and upkeep of the walls of the lord's fort. Thus, the human actions which caused these ramparts to be built served not only to symbolize the lord's status, but also actually required the roles of superior and inferior to be acted out and thereby reproduced.

Walls and fences, as others have shown (Leone 1973; Samson, this volume), carry many latent ideological meanings. In Pictland Symbol Stones are the most overt surviving expressions of social

interaction. Hundreds of these monuments were erected during the early medieval period; now the majority survive only as fragments. At the turn of the century they were classified into three main groups, of which the first two are of interest here (Allen and Anderson 1903). Class I stones (Figure 7) are unshaped boulders or slabs with simple incised symbols; Class II (Figure 8) are more elaborate cross-slabs which also incorporate symbols into their designs. The archaeological contexts of these symbols are many and varied and it would be clearly impossible to consider the full range of this material here. For a fuller discussion see Henderson (1967), Stevenson (1955), and Driscoll (1988b). Two of the most common situations are examined here.

Over the years the Class I stones have been interpreted variously as burial memorials, territorial signposts, and reminders of kinship obligations, to cite only the more reasonable theories. Recent research has demonstrated to most archaeologists' satisfaction that Class I stones were erected as burial memorials (Thomas 1963; Close-Brooks 1984). The historical context of the stones coincides with expansion of land ownership by the nobility and the development of hereditary kingship in early medieval Britain and Ireland. The most plausible rationale for erecting the monuments was as part of a strategy adopted by heirs of the deceased to secure claims to property and titles by issuing a permanent and authoritative statement (Driscoll 1988b).

The precise meaning of the 40 or so symbols which are found on the stones probably cannot be deciphered. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe from other contexts in which they are found, for instance on precious metal objects and scratched into cave walls, that the use of Pictish symbols had both aristocratic implications and arcane religious connotations. Additionally it seems likely, but cannot be proven, that some of the symbols represent dynastic or lineage emblems. The deployment of the symbols in a permanent medium suggests an analogy with later medieval attempts to use written records as a means of establishing an authoritative discourse on matters relating to land tenure (Clanchy 1979). The erection of a symbol-
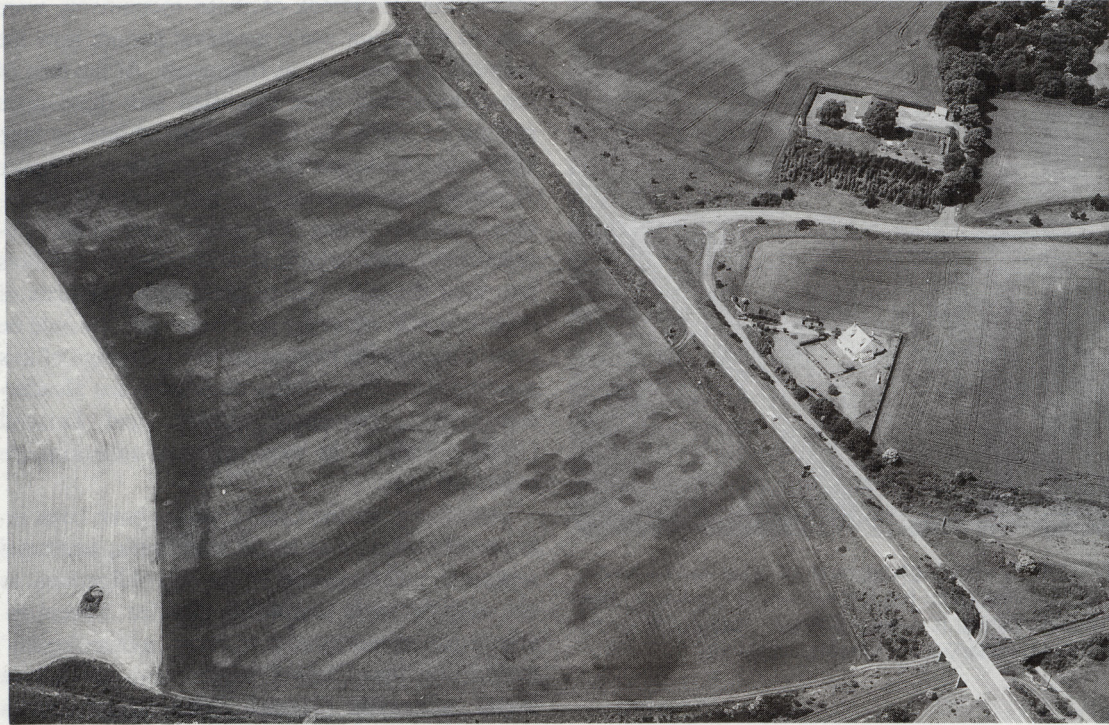
FIGURE 6. Aerial photograph of Hawkhill settlement at Easter Kinnear, Fife showing the filled-in hollows occupied by early medieval houses. (Courtesy of Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland.)

bearing monument makes a similarly authoritative statement about the relationship of the heir to the property of the dead as does a written land charter.

The establishment of Christianity during the period of the consolidation of the Pictish kingdom saw the introduction of a new field of discourse derived from that initiated by the Class I stones. The discourse addressed by the Class II cross-slabs broadly concerns social status and draws upon religion. A central aspect of this focus relates to the social identity of the clergy and the legitimacy of the secular aristocracy. This meaning of the Class II stones is implicit in the continued use of the symbols and is explicit in some of the representational imagery. Smyth's (1984) account of the critical political role of the early church in Scotland and Ó'Corráin's (1972) in Ireland illustrate just how interconnected the realms of lay and clerical

power were. Their accounts suggest that hard and fast distinctions should not be drawn between the secular and religious realms. This caution is certainly borne out by the content of the Class II stones. Secular imagery abounds on these Christian monuments; the most easily interpreted are of members of the nobility engaged in aristocratic pursuits—hunting and fighting, or portrayed as warriors. Such imagery reflects the endowment of religious foundations by the nobility and of the patronage of early medieval art by the aristocracy, but the relationship goes deeper. Henderson (1967) has drawn attention to the ornamentation, like the decorations which imitate "jewel" settings on the Aberlemno roadside cross-slab (Figure 8), that take their inspiration directly from the ornate objects of fine metalwork which adorned both the garments of the secular nobility and the altars of

FIGURE 7. Aberlemno, Forfarshire, Class I Symbol Stone, approximate height 1.7 m. (Photo by author.)

FIGURE 8. Aberlemno, Forfarshire, Class II Symbol Stone, approximate height 3.5 m. (Courtesy of Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland.)

the church. All of these observations point to the same social fact: the clergy and the secular aristocracy shared many of the same attributes and interests because they belonged to the same social class. Since these stone crosses mark the places where the Picts encountered God, it is fair to suggest that one of the intentions behind these images was to imply a kind of divine sanction for the nobility in both their secular and ecclesiastical roles.

So far the discussion has focused on discourses dominated by the nobility, mostly because members of that class were able to draw upon the resources necessary to make fairly permanent statements. Access to non-elite expressions and to discourses over which commoners enjoyed relatively more control is more difficult, but not impossible. Such evidence is becoming increasingly available as aerial reconnaissance reveals more ev-

idence of farmsteads, cultivation remains, and the outlines of the Pictish landscape (Maxwell 1983, 1987; Driscoll 1987). The emerging picture is of an intensely rural landscape composed of pastures, fields, and dispersed settlements. The Balgonie site (Figure 9) provides a particularly clear example of this complexly ordered landscape, consisting of an enclosed farmstead surrounded by fields containing the evidence of strip fields. The aerial photographs of settlement remains draw attention to the most dynamic field of social reproduction in the early Middle Ages: the relations of agricultural production. The same legal tracts describing the obligations of tenants to build their lord's fort also discuss the payments in agricultural produce due to the lord at fixed intervals during the year (Mac

FIGURE 9. Aerial photograph showing the silted-up ditches and internal features of a farmstead complex and associated traces of agriculture at Balgonie, Perthshire. (Courtesy of Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland.)

Niocaill 1972, 1981). Indeed the law tracts seem more concerned with the details of rendering such payments in kind than with the details of labor obligation and military service.

Scholars are only in the very early stages of working out the details of these agricultural relations for the Picts, but already it is clear that the arable potential of the east-central regions was being heavily exploited. Massive subterranean grain stores known as *souterrains* were widespread (Watkins 1980; Maxwell 1987). These stores were not centralized, therefore a degree of control by the producers is implied. The apparently abrupt abandonment of *souterrains* may imply an end to this autonomy, perhaps indicating the increase in centralization associated with the expanding kingdom of southern Pictland as suggested by Watkins (1984). The pastoral economy was equally important and was probably dominated by dairy cattle herding as Finbar McCormick (1983) has shown in Ireland. The significance of the relations engendered by agricultural production is that they cut

across every level of society. Because virtually everyone—even the great nobles and clerics—was directly involved with farming, the obligations which grew out of it served to reproduce social relations on a daily, seasonal, and annual basis.

This final field of discourse is mentioned not because it is particularly well understood, but because it is the area in which further research must take place if it is to become possible to write a meaningful social history of early Scotland. With the recent identification of the settlement sites and other sites previously lost through modern agriculture, archaeologists have the opportunity to investigate the landscape of the most productive regions. These areas were of the greatest political importance and consequently are the best documented. Scholars know from later texts that already by the 12th century the region was divided into large estates (Barrow 1973) composed of a number of small farming settlements. In many cases these settlements seem to have focused on hillforts with origins in the Pictish period (Driscoll 1987:259–337). The ability to identify likely sites of non-noble residences from the air offers the possibility of understanding the structure of settlements from a perspective which differs from that represented by the hillforts and symbol stones. It is therefore important to make the effort to understand the basic elements in the landscape, since it is here in the houses and fields that most Picts made their mark on history. Moreover the great improvements in environmental archaeology in the last two decades offer hope that as these farmsteads are investigated the economic relations upon which this entire society was built will become clearer. At that point archaeologists may begin to understand aspects of Pictish life which were too commonplace or too dangerous to have been carved in stone.

Conclusions

This paper has tried to show how a study of the contexts in which social relations are reproduced cuts across the boundaries imposed on historical study by the conventional division between histor-

ical and archaeological scholarship. It has also tried to suggest a method for analyzing artifacts without losing sight of the circumstances in which they were drawn upon socially.

The importance of looking at these three short examples of fields of discourse—the hillforts, Symbol Stones, and the organization of the agricultural landscape—is that they permit the material record to be used to investigate key historical issues. Indeed the general question of the origins of the Medieval Scottish Kingdom cannot be understood in social terms without reference to these three fields of discourse. What is evident from even this brief discussion is that the three classic areas of medieval social and political action—aristocratic warfare, church politics, and agricultural production—have assumed recognizable shapes at an early date within Pictland.

However the ways in which the conflicts were played out within these familiar medieval arenas were uniquely Pictish. If the development of Scotland is to be understood in its own terms and not as a regional variant of some vague pan-European trend, then attention must focus on the local material conditions, as recovered archaeologically.

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